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The Origin and Date  
of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*

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When Rudolf Hercher published *Astrampsychi oraculorum decades CIII*, he buried his edition in the *Jahresbericht über das Königl. Joachimsthal'sche Gymnasium* (Berlin, 1863), a publication not to be found even in the British Museum. In 1901 J. Rendel Harris reprinted most of Hercher's text in *The Annotators of the Codex Bezae* (Appendix C, pp. 128–160), but even this reprint does not appear to have caught much attention.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, numerous questions connected with the text have remained unanswered. In particular, the problems concerning its origin and date deserve close study, and it is to these problems that I shall address myself in the present article. For a general introduction to the book of Astrampsychus and for a discussion of the method by which it was composed, I refer the reader to my paper in *BICS*, 17 (1970), 95–100. Instead of Hercher's awkward and somewhat misleading title, I shall use Björck's more convenient formulation, *Sortes Astrampsychi*.<sup>2</sup> I shall also refer to the author as Astrampsychus. The work is a patent forgery,<sup>3</sup> but continually to call its author pseudo-Astrampsychus is too pedantic and is hardly illuminating.

The questions of the origin and dating of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, I believe, are intimately related. But before I deal with them in detail, the reader may find it useful to have a survey of previous scholarly work on this subject.

<sup>1</sup> E.g., even those most indefatigable of papyrologists B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt failed to notice that a fragmentary papyrus which they published in 1916 as P. Oxy., XII, 1477, in fact belongs to the book of Astrampsychus. See below, p. 54 and note 5.

<sup>2</sup> G. Björck, "Heidnische und christliche Orakel mit fertigen Antworten," *Symb. Osl.*, 19 (1939), 95.

<sup>3</sup> It is so treated, e.g., in the recent work of W. Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum* (Munich, 1971), p. 81.

Hercher assigned the text to the early Byzantine period. For reasons that he did not disclose, he felt that its author wrote "graecitate ea, quam Byzantini scriptores sexto fere vel septimo post Christum saeculo professi sunt" (*Praefatio*, p. V). Following Hercher, P. Tannery stated that the work could hardly antedate the sixth century, though he conceded that the text in some more primitive form may have circulated under the name of Astrampsychus early in the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> The Swedish scholar G. Björck effectively demolished the late dating by showing that P. Oxy., XII, 1477, which the editors said was "probably written in or shortly before the reign of Diocletian," in fact comes from the *Sortes*.<sup>5</sup> Because the name Astrampsychus appears in an Egyptian magical papyrus (PGM, I, 8.1), and because a later redactor clearly differentiated between the part of the introduction composed by Astrampsychus and that designed for a Christian audience,<sup>6</sup> Björck concluded that "ein Orakelinstrument, das den *Sortes Astrampsychi* der Mss. sehr ähnlich sah, und von welchem Ox. 1477 ein Fragment ist, im römisch-heidnischen Ägypten angefertigt und schon dort und damals unter den Namen Astrampsychos gebracht worden ist."<sup>7</sup>

Attempts to establish a more accurate date thus far have been in vain. In *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia, 1954), F. H. Cramer

<sup>4</sup> P. Tannery, "Astrampsychos," *REG*, 11 (1898), 103 and 105. Tannery's arguments rest on mistaken ideas concerning the transmission of the text, as I shall demonstrate in a subsequent study.

<sup>5</sup> Björck (see note 2 above), p. 97. Perhaps because of international conditions at that time, this identification did not receive the acclamation it merited, and in "An Early Mediaeval 'Book of Fate': the *Sortes xii patriarcharum*," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1954), 52, T. C. Skeat again called attention to Björck's discovery; see also E. G. Turner, *Greek Papyri* (Oxford, 1968), p. 188, n. 59. But even now scholars fail to connect the papyrus with Astrampsychus. The following, e.g., deal with it as if it were anonymous: S. Safrai, "The Avoidance of Public Office in Papyrus Oxy. 1477 and in Talmudic Sources," *The Journal of Jewish Studies*, 14 (1963), 67-70 (I owe this reference to Dr. J. D. Thomas, University of Durham); B. G. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri* (Athens, 1973), p. 399; O. Montevecchi, *La Papirologia* (Turin, 1973), p. 279.

<sup>6</sup> "Er [Astrampsychos] erscheint in den Mss. am Anfang des Ganzen als Verfasser eines Briefes an 'König Ptolemaios,' und der spätere Redaktor zieht eine scharfe Grenze zwischen seinem Werke und den christlichen Einschiebseln: . . . οὗτω μὲν οὖν ὁ 'Αστράμψυχος, οἱ δὲ τῆς εἰς τὸν ἕνα θεὸν ἀκλινῶς ἀντερχόμενοι λατρείας προσέθηκαν . . .," *op. cit.* (see note 2 above), p. 98. Support for Björck's view comes from two manuscripts which were overlooked by Hercher in the first and only edition of the *Sortes*: Codex Erlangensis 89 and Codex Marcianus 336 both lack the section beginning οἱ δὲ τῆς εἰς τὸν ἕνα θεὸν κτλ. and are devoid of the other signs of Christian interference which characterize most of the manuscripts of the *Sortes*.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* (see note 2 above), p. 98.

asserts that the *Sortes* is "prior to the time of Manetho's *Apotelesmata*, i.e., prior to A.D. 100" (p. 185). This assertion, accepted by W. and H. G. Gundel in *Astrologumena* (Wiesbaden, 1966), p. 157, is simply an opinion; no evidence is presented to support it, and it is further vitiated by Cramer's confusion of the *Sortes* with the *Onirocritica* also attributed to Astrampsychus.<sup>8</sup>

Previous scholarship has established a terminus ante quem: P. Oxy., XII, 1477, shows that the *Sortes* was not written before the early fourth century. Two additional papyri of the *Sortes* recently have been published: P. Oxy., XXXVIII, 2832 and 2833; the second of these belongs, like 1477, to the late third or early fourth century, but it is very likely that the first is to be assigned to the third, thereby pushing the terminus ante quem somewhat farther back.<sup>9</sup> For establishing a terminus post quem the evidence perhaps is less straightforward. If it is rightly interpreted, it corroborates Björck's conclusion that the *Sortes Astrampsychi* was written in Egypt. Egyptian origin, as I hope to demonstrate, fixes a terminus post quem for the work.

The introductory epistle prefixed to some of the medieval manuscripts of the *Sortes* refers to Astrampsychus as an Egyptian.<sup>10</sup> A tradition recorded in Diogenes Laertius 1.2 that he was Persian magus living between the time of Zoroaster and Alexander the Great was either ignored or overlooked by the compiler of the *Sortes*.<sup>11</sup> The hypothesis that the work was written in Egypt comes immediately to mind, and this hypothesis receives some support from the occurrence of the name Astrampsychus in the Egyptian magical papyrus mentioned above. But the designation of

<sup>8</sup> The latter was published as an appendix to Rigaltius' edition of Artemidorus: *Artemidori Daldiani et Achmetis Sereimi F. Oneirocritica, Astrampsychi et Nicephori versus etiam Oneirocritici, Nicolai Rigaltii ad Artemidorum Notae* (Paris, 1603). W. and H. G. Gundel also follow Cramer in confusing the two works: *Astrologumena*, p. 157 and n. 48.

<sup>9</sup> It should not be assumed that 2832 was drafted early in the third century. In the edition I stated that, on paleographical grounds, the papyrus "should probably be assigned to the third century." Professor H. C. Youtie writes to me (letter of February 24, 1974): "I have made numerous comparisons with facsimiles, and I have had to conclude that your dating to the 3rd cent. is extremely likely. Perhaps if I had been dating it for the first time, I should have said late 3rd/early 4th."

<sup>10</sup> This is explicitly stated in the introductory words of some manuscripts: 'Ἀστραμψύχου Αἰγυπτίου πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Πτολεμαῖον περὶ προρρήσεως διαφόρων ζητημάτων. In others it is implicit: βασιλεῖ μεγάλῳ Πτολεμαίῳ Ἀστράμψυχος ἱερεὺς καὶ βίβλων ἐπισφραγιστῆς ἰδίῳ δεσπότη χαίρειν. A detailed discussion of these and other details which relate to the *Überlieferungsgeschichte* of the *Sortes* will appear in the *praefatio* to my Teubner edition (in progress).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the passage in Diogenes Laertius, see Björck (see note 2 above), p. 98, n. 1.

Astrampsychus as *Αἰγύπτιος* hardly constitutes proof that the *Sortes* originated in Egypt. Egypt always has been the land of mystery *par excellence*, and therefore the writer of such a text as the *Sortes* would be eager to associate his production with that country.<sup>12</sup>

However, there is other evidence to suggest a connection with Egypt. This is a matter of great importance in dating the text. In particular, two of the questions in the work deserve close attention in this connection: No. 88 *εἰ γίνομαι βουλευτής*, and No. 95 *εἰ γίνομαι δεκάπρωτος*.<sup>13</sup> If the *Sortes* was in fact written in Egypt, these questions fix 200 A.D. as the terminus post quem for the text. These offices were not established in Egypt until that year, when the Roman system of municipal bureaucracy was grafted onto the country.<sup>14</sup> The earliest papyrus of the *Sortes*, P. Oxy., 2832, belongs to the third century A.D. Egyptian origin of the *Sortes* therefore would mean that the work was written sometime in the third century.

The evidence I have in mind comes from the oracular petitions of Egypt.<sup>15</sup> These petitions, drafted either in Egyptian or in Greek, are small sheets of papyrus which individuals presented to local temples in the hope of ascertaining the future. As we shall see presently, they bear close resemblance to the questions in the *Sortes Astrampsychi*. The petitions are in the form of a protasis followed by an apodosis. This form is clearly visible in the Egyptian texts. The earlier of these are in Demotic and

<sup>12</sup> Compare, e.g., Ps.-Manetho, *Βίβλος τῆς Σώθews* (FGrHist., II, 609, F 25), which is entitled *ἐπιστολή Μανεθῶ τοῦ Σεβεννύτου πρὸς Πτολεμαῖον τὸν Φιλάδελφον*; see Speyer (see note 3 above), p. 81 and n. 8.

<sup>13</sup> On *εἰ* see below, p. 57 and note 21. In quoting from the *Sortes* I follow the earlier tradition, preserved in the papyri and in the better manuscripts, wherein the present tense is more common than the future. Hercher's witnesses prefer the future, though they achieve no consistency in this respect.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., A. K. Bowman, *The Town Councils of Roman Egypt* (Toronto, 1971), passim. Question 95 *εἰ γίνομαι δεκάπρωτος* may permit an even more accurate dating of the text. Although the *dekaproteia* is thought to have been introduced in 200 A.D., J. D. Thomas, in a paper delivered at the Fourteenth International Congress of Papyrologists (Oxford, 1974), argues that it did not appear until the reign of either the Gordians or Philip. He may well be right, but his view cannot be proven because of P. Lond., 1157R, "which suggests that *dekaproti* existed, in some places at least, during or before the reign of Alexander Severus," P. J. Parson, *JRS*, 57 (1967), 136 f. (I am grateful to Dr. Thomas for communicating the results of his research to me before the congress.)

<sup>15</sup> In a paper in the *Festschrift Marcel Richard* (in press), I discuss the relationship between the *Sortes* and the Egyptian oracular petitions, without, however, entering into the importance this relation has for dating the text. The following discussion both summarizes and supplements my article. See also A. Henrichs, "Zwei Orakelfragen," *ZPE*, 11 (1973), 115-119.

belong to the Ptolemaic period.<sup>16</sup> One example will suffice to show the structure: "O my great Lord Soknebtynis, the great god. It is thy servant Stotoëte, son of Imhūtep, who says 'if it is a good thing for me to live with Tanwē, daughter of Ḥape, she being my wife, send out to me this petition in writing.'"<sup>17</sup> These texts appear in positive (e.g., "if it is a good thing . . .") and in negative form ("if it is not a good thing . . ."), and by some process, probably sortition, the petitioner obtained the copy chosen by the god.<sup>18</sup>

The later Egyptian texts, in Coptic, continue the Demotic syntactical structure. Of the two texts of this type so far published, one is of special interest. Written in the seventh to eighth century A.D., it survives in two copies, one of which reads: "O almighty God, if you command me, your servant Paul, to go to Antinoou and remain there, order me through this papyrus." The other gives the alternative: "O almighty God, if you command me, your servant Paul, to remain [here] under the roof of the monastery of Apa Thomas, order me through this papyrus."<sup>19</sup>

The protasis-apodosis formulation which underlies the Egyptian texts is also the basis not only of the Greek oracular petitions but also, I would maintain, of the questions in the *Sortes Astrampsychi*.

The Greek petitions have been most recently discussed, with full bibliography, by A. Henrichs.<sup>20</sup> Most of them use εἰ, corresponding to the Egyptian parallels<sup>21</sup>; e.g., P. Mich. inv. 1258<sup>22</sup>

κυρία Εἰσὺν εἰ ἐξοῦ  
μοι γέγονεν ὁ  
πόνος καὶ θερα-  
πείαν μοι διδοῖς,  
5 ποιήσόν μοι τοῦ-  
το ἀναχθῆναι.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For bibliography pertinent to the Demotic texts, see Henrichs (see note 15 above), p. 115, n. 1.

<sup>17</sup> P. Flor., 8700 (G. Botti, "Biglietti per l'oracolo di Soknebtynis in caratteri demotici," *Studi in memoria di Ippolito Rosellini*, II, Pisa, 1955, 13); the translation is that of J. Černý, *Egyptian Oracles*, in R. A. Parker, *A Saite Oracle Papyrus from Thebes* (Providence, 1962), p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> E. Bresciani, P. Pestman. P. Mil. Vogl., III, *Testi demotici*, 195 f.

<sup>19</sup> The translation of the Coptic is mine. The text was published by H. de Nie, "Een koptisch-christelijke Orakelvraag," *Ex Oriente Lux: Jaarbericht*, 8 (1942), 615-618. The same pattern of expression appears in the other Coptic oracular petition, published by S. Donadoni, "Una domanda oracolare cristiana da Antinoc," *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 1962), p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> See note 15 above.

<sup>21</sup> Henrichs (see note 15 above), p. 116 and n. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Published by Henrichs (see note 15 above), p. 117 f.

<sup>23</sup> In line 1 read Ἰσὺ and ἐκ σοῦ (see editor's comments *ad loc.*).

[Editor's translation: "Herrin Isis! Falls Du mein Leiden verursacht hast und mir Heilung verschaffst, veranlasse, dass mir dieses (Billet) zurückgebracht wird!"]

The questions in the *Sortes Astrampsychi* resemble these Greek oracular petitions both in content and in structure. The following examples illustrate contextual similarity:

- No. 20 εἰ ἀγοράζω τὸ προκείμενον  
PGM II 31c εἰ συμφέρει μοι ἀγοράσαι . . . [τοῦτό μ]οι δός
- No. 21 εἰ γὰρ καὶ συμφέρει μοι  
Schubart 12<sup>24</sup> [εἰ] δέδοται μοι γαμῆσαι [τοῦ]τό μοι δός
- No. 42 εἰ σώζομαι ἀσθενῶν  
PGM II 30c ἡ μὲν σοθήσωι ταύτης ἥς ἐν ἐμοὶ ἀσθενία[s] . . .  
τοῦτό[ν] μοι ἐξέεικον<sup>25</sup>

The examples from *Astrampsychus* may be translated as if they were questions, and in terms of semantics they are in fact questions. But grammatically they are protases, to which the appropriate apodosis (e.g., τοῦτό μοι δός) has been suppressed. In other words, what we find in the *Sortes* is a direct descendant of the protasis-apodosis formulation of the Egyptian oracular petitions. It is this connection with the petitions which corroborates the view that the work was composed in Egypt.

I have attempted to explain and clarify one feature of the *Sortes Astrampsychi* by utilizing the evidence provided by the Egyptian oracular texts. If I have succeeded in connecting the *Sortes* with these texts, we may say with some conviction that the work originated in Egypt sometime during the third century of our era.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> From the collection assembled by W. Schubart, *Zeitschrift f. ägypt. Sprache*, 67 (1931), 110–115.

<sup>25</sup> Read εἰ μὲν σωθῶ (or σωθήσομαι) ταύτης τῆς ἐν ἐμοὶ ἀσθενείας, τοῦτό μοι ἐξέεικον. For εἰ with subjunctive see Blass-Debrunner-Funk, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, 372.3 with bibliography.

<sup>26</sup> An expanded version of this paper was delivered as a lecture at the University of Illinois, March 1, 1974.